

# Learning Words

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Words are the basic unit of language form. Without a sufficient vocabulary, one cannot communicate effectively or express ideas. Having a limited vocabulary is also a barrier that prevents students from learning a foreign language. If learners do not know how to expand their vocabulary, they gradually lose interest in learning.

In China, vocabulary is taught mainly through reading. Each course book has a list of words with translations. Teachers must prepare extensively to master these words, and students try to memorize these words, unsure about which meanings should be remembered. The texts seem to be the only means of providing new vocabulary. As a result, learners forget words easily. This article discusses techniques learners can use to learn words in context.

## **Contextual Way of Vocabulary Teaching and Learning**

Learners seldom ask such questions as “What does run mean?” They know it is difficult to explain the meaning of a word without knowing the context. For example, look what happens to run in different contexts:

Don’t run so fast.

She has a run in her stocking.

Soon there will be a run on the banks.

He batted in a run when it counted.

The car will run better now.

These sentences show that run may have different meanings. In fact, the word run appears not to change, only its surroundings change.

his function of context also applies to unfamiliar words. In expressing the idea of inferring meaning from context, Nuttall (1982:70) provides examples defining the word tock (a nonsense word).

She poured the water into a tock. Then, lifting the tock, she drank. Unfortunately, as she was setting it down again, the tock slipped from her hand and broke. Only the handle remained in one piece.

In this example, we see how context can help explain the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

Many professionals support the idea of inferring word meanings from contexts. Kruse (1987) suggests introducing vocabulary items in such a way as to allow the student to infer or guess the meanings from the context or illustrations. She believes that students should be encouraged to make intelligent guesses about word meanings. Clarke and Silberstein (1977:145) think students can often obtain a general understanding of an unfamiliar word if they continue reading.

Guessing word meaning from the context is possible. However, the question is whether it is also possible subjectively for students to be prepared to recognize and utilize the function of the context. In answering this, Twaddell (1980) analyzes the possibilities as follows: first, students know something about the content of the reading or listening materials from their knowledge of first language reading; secondly, they know how the meaning of the words they learn refers to parts of reality.

Since a contextual way of learning and expanding vocabulary is possible, we need to know how to train students in this skill. Nation (1983) gives a very good model on how to guess unknown words:

1. Look at the unknown word and decide its part of speech. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb?
2. Look at the clause or sentence containing the unknown word. If the unknown word is a noun, what does this noun do, or what is done to it? And what adjectives describe it? What verb is it near? If it is a verb, what nouns does it go with? Is it modified by an adverb? If it is an adjective, what noun does it go with? If it is an adverb, what verb is it modifying?
3. Look at the relationship between the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and other sentences or paragraphs. Sometimes this relationship will be signaled by conjunctions like but, because, if, when, or by adverbs like however, as a result. The possible types of relationship include cause and effect, contrast, time, exemplification, and summary.
4. Use the knowledge you have gained from steps 1 to 3 to guess the meaning of the word.
5. Check if your guess is correct.
  - (a) See that the part of speech of your guess is the same as the part of speech of the unknown word. If it is not the same, then something is wrong with your guess.
  - (b) Replace the unknown word with your guess. If the sentence makes sense, your guess is probably correct.
  - (c) Break the unknown word into its prefix, root, and suffix, if possible. If the meanings of the prefix and root correspond to your guess, it is good. If not, look at your guess again, but do not change anything if you feel reasonably certain about your guess.

According to Nation (1983:89), this process is a strategy that an efficient reader already uses. To acquire this strategy he suggests students learn to watch for the following clues.

## Structural Clues

We use structural clues to determine the type or grammatical category of the new word. This tells us the kind of meaning to infer or look for. For example, if students are told that kneaf is a verb, then the sequence, “the sploony urdle kneafed” will begin to make structural sense.

Learners know that either sploony or urdle must be a noun, since their grammar knowledge tells them that a gap between the and a verb must be filled by a noun. Their morphological knowledge will tell them that sploony is probably an adjective, and if it is a noun, urdle may be another noun or an adverb. The teacher can provide students with practice in this technique by preparing specific exercises, like sentences containing nonsense words.

To help determine the meaning of words, the following clues are necessary: Students should learn to notice the various types of definition clues. Among these are the parentheses and footnotes, which are the most obvious definition clues. The meaning of a word can be explained in parentheses. For example: “We have adopted the view that every sentence can be described as a string (sequence) of constituents.” Students can do exercises like drawing a line under the words in parentheses, or giving the meaning of the word that comes before the parentheses.

Most students enjoy learning words with similar and opposite meanings. The task is to get learners to recognize the definitional role these synonyms and antonyms often play. Students can learn that an unfamiliar word is often defined in a sentence using be and a synonym. For instance, a birthday party is an observance, that is, a remembrance of someone’s day of birth.

## Inference clues

Inference clues require a higher level of analytical skill and practice than the previous types. For these types of clues, the same method of practice-recognizing elements and obtaining meaning from the elements can be used.

The meanings of the words can be inferred from examples, often by using physical clues such as i.e., e.g., and for example. Two sample sentences follow:

1. Iran is trying to restore many of its ancient monuments; Persepolis, for example, is being partly rebuilt by a group of Italian experts.
2. Perceiving, learning, and thinking are examples of cognitive processes.

By using the sum of the information in a sentence or paragraph, students can understand an unfamiliar word. Here are four examples:

1. Many products are sold to stop perspiration. This wetness comes from our body whenever we are too warm, work very hard, or are afraid, and it usually doesn’t smell very good. (With a physical cue)
2. He’s a really good athlete. He plays sports well. (Without a physical cue)
3. He’s bound to win. He can’t lose. (Opposite meaning)

4. The forsythia was covered with the golden flowers that bloom early in the spring. (Information given)

Readers can infer meanings of words by recalling similar situations or experiences and by making the appropriate inferences. For instance, "The patient was 85 years old and suffering from arthritis. He moved forward slowly, taking short, shuffling steps."

Learners can often guess a word because it causes a result, or it is the result caused by something described in the text. One example follows: "The conflagration was so fierce that within just a few seconds one could see towering flames where the house had stood, and the smoke, which filled the sky, could be seen for miles around."

Sometimes learners can guess the meaning of a word by an explanation or a description given in the same sentence or paragraph: "The soldier was filled with intense remorse when he saw the terrible injuries suffered by people hit by the bomb his plane had dropped. He was ashamed to look at the bleeding and broken bodies as they were carried into the hospital. He cried and moaned when he saw that one was just a small child."

Students can learn a definition through the association between an object and its function or purpose for use: "The scientist removed the treatise from the shelf and began to read."

Many English words are formed using prefixes and suffixes. Teaching these meanings can help students decipher meanings of unknown words by analyzing the word's structure. Students can also practice forming words by using suffixes and prefixes.

## Guessing

In developing the basic skill of guessing, Twaddell recommends that students practice while guided. "It is the teacher's task to organize the teaching so as to facilitate this development" (Twaddell 1980). Teachers should keep in mind that a certain amount of vagueness in guessing the meaning of words must be accepted. The teacher should not expect students to come up with exact meanings while guessing in this manner. Teachers should also help students to realize that "though successive encounters with a word and successive guessing in context after context, we sooner or later learn more and more precisely the meanings of the once unfamiliar word. By the time we have encountered a word often enough, the accumulated exclusions have subtracted enough from the vagueness, and the associations of the word with its meanings have become increasingly precise" (Twaddell 1980).

## Conclusion

Teaching vocabulary is a very important task in teaching English. By using successful techniques to learn new vocabulary, students will find words easier to remember and will become more motivated in class. Expanding a learner's vocabulary by using context clues is a way to reduce the need for consulting dictionaries. The contextual approach may be a reinforcement tool for students to use in reading and listening.

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